



Jan van Goyen
Dutch, 1596 - 1656

Ice Scene near a Wooden Observation Tower

1646

oil on panel

overall: 36.5 × 34.3 cm (14 3/8 × 13 1/2 in.)

Inscription: lower right on the boat, VG in monogram: VG 1646

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ENTRY

Jan van Goyen was one of the most innovative Dutch landscape artists of the 17th century. He began his career in the early 1620s in his native Leiden by depicting the daily activities of the lower and middle classes, often as they traversed the dunes that protect the country from the North Sea. In the 1630s, following the example of his Haarlem colleague Esaias van de Velde I (Dutch, 1587 - 1630), he developed a “tonal” style of painting that rendered the Dutch landscape in subtle hues of grays and ochers to harmonize atmospheric effects. [1] Gradually, Van Goyen’s works took on a greater sense of visual drama, both through his introduction of imposing trees or structures to his foregrounds and through his ability to capture the varied cloud formations that activate the Dutch skies. He also developed an interest in panoramic views, which he often explored by observing a city from across a wide expanse of water. [2] All of these elements are found in this beautifully preserved winter scene, signed and dated 1646.

This painting features a remarkable wooden tower that also served as a beacon to help mariners navigate the country’s network of waterways. Ship captains could

see this towering structure during the day; then, at dusk or during foul weather, a caretaker could mount the ladders to reach the uppermost platform and light a beacon situated in the small wooden structure to help guide ships. Here, in the dead of winter, this tower is the setting for a communal gathering. While many on the ice are skating, others push small sleds carrying people or cargo. Some just stand and talk in tightly knit clusters. In one particularly engaging vignette, an enterprising young skater hitches a ride behind a horse-drawn box sleigh filled with passengers. Beyond the tower is a rustic home with smoke drifting from its chimney. Clouds sweep across the sky, while along the far shore one sees a distant city with a windmill, a massive stone tower, a large church, and a number of ships along the quay.

Van Goyen's painting must be based on reality, but, as is characteristic of the artist, it probably does not precisely record an existing scene. Van Goyen was likely inspired by a tall beacon he observed in the mid-1640s during one of his trips near Dordrecht. [3] The specific location of this structure, which he rendered twice in a sketchbook now in Museum Bredius, The Hague [fig. 1] [fig. 2], is not known, but was likely situated southwest of Dordrecht and on the opposite side of the Oude Maas. [4] This beacon, rising on a single pole from a wooden landing, is comparable in height to the one in the painting. In both instances a small wooden shelter atop the pole protects the beacon from wind and rain. Notably, however, the tower in the drawings is a much simpler structure and lacks the complex arrangement of supporting beams, ladders, and platforms that gives the tower such a dynamic presence in the painting.

The evidence that this wooden structure was the inspiration for Van Goyen's painting stems in part from other pictorial elements in the sketches that relate to the painting. In the first of these sketches, which Van Goyen made to the left of the tower, one sees the same house that appears in the painting, as well as the church. In the second drawing, made to the right of the tower, comparable large structures—including the church, a stone tower, and a windmill—are visible along the far shore. In conceiving *Ice Scene near a Wooden Observation Tower*, Van Goyen elaborated upon and combined motifs from these two drawings, a working process that is consistent with the way he often used drawings as a basis for compositional ideas in his paintings. [5] He also transformed the season from summer to winter, which enabled him to enliven his scene with numerous figures skating and pushing sleds across the frozen water.

Van Goyen's painting has a dramatic character that belies its small scale. This effect is partly the result of the vertical format, rare in his work, which he chose in order to properly feature the verticality of the wooden observation tower. [6] This orientation also allowed him to juxtapose the beacon against the winter sky, where steel-gray clouds swirl overhead and birds circle the tower, reinforcing the sense that humans and nature are intimately intertwined in this frigid landscape. Cold, wintry light pervades the scene, not only in the sky but also in the variety of light effects on the broad sheet of ice covering this stretch of water.

The painting's freshness is enhanced by its remarkable condition. Van Goyen's vigorous brushwork is evident throughout the painting, whether in his rendering of the wooden structure, the figures, or the branches of the trees. Interestingly, upon close observation one sees that Van Goyen initially blocked in figures and buildings in brownish-ocher paint, and then refined their shapes and gave them color in his final layer. Although he made small adjustments in the scale and position of compositional elements throughout his painting, he seems to have had a clear sense of the pictorial effects he wanted to achieve in this winter scene, which he executed with great verve and surety.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

May 7, 2019

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Jan van Goyen, *The Bredius-Kronig Sketchbook*, fol. 43, begun 1644, black chalk with brownish red wash, Otto J. G. Kronig Collection, on loan to Museum Bredius, The Hague



fig. 2 Jan van Goyen, *The Bredius-Kronig Sketchbook*, fol. 44, begun 1644, black chalk with brownish red wash, Otto J. G. Kronig Collection, on loan to Museum Bredius, The Hague

NOTES

- [1] An excellent example of a tonal landscape is Van Goyen's *View of Dordrecht from the Dordtse Kil* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1978.11.1).
- [2] See Van Goyen's *View of Rhenen* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2014.136.33).
- [3] The Dutch erected numerous tall warning markers along their inner waterways. Many of them, as seen in Simon de Vlieger's *Estuary at Day's End* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1997.101.1), were simple structures, often with a barrel placed on top of a tall pole. These structures warned sailors of the presence of dangerous sandbars that would not have been visible at high tide. Shorebirds nested in the barrels, and in foggy weather or at twilight, when the markers were not visible, sailors would watch the birds' flight patterns as an indicator of what lay ahead. For paintings by Van Goyen that depict similar wooden structures, see Hans-Ulrich Beck, *Jan van Goyen, 1596–1656: ein Oeuvreverzeichnis*, vol. 2, *Katalog der Gemälde* (Amsterdam, 1973), 321, cat. no. 704; 341, cat. nos. 757 and 759; 356–357, cat. nos. 795, 796, and 798; 367, cat. no. 819; 390, cat. no. 871; 398, cat. no. 885.
- [4] See Edwin Buijsen, *The Sketchbook of Jan van Goyen from the Bredius-*

Kronig Collection (The Hague, 1993), 1:15–16, 67, fol. nos. 43 and 44. The earliest sheet in this sketchbook dates from 1644. Buijsen notes that these two drawings of a landing with a beacon were probably made near Dordrecht because the large squat building in the background of fol. no. 44 superficially resembles the tower of the Grote Kerk, also known as the Onze Lieve Vrouwe Kerk, in that city. Hans-Ulrich Beck connected these drawings to two paintings by Van Goyen (but not to *Ice Scene near a Wooden Observation Tower*). See Hans-Ulrich Beck, *Jan van Goyen, 1596–1656: ein Oeuvreverzeichnis*, vol. 2, *Katalog der Gemälde* (Amsterdam, 1973), 364, cat. no. 811; 370, cat. no. 825. Should the large structure on the far shore be Dordrecht's Grote Kerk, it is likely that Van Goyen drew this wooden beacon near the village of Lijnde, just south of Zwijndrecht.

- [5] For further examples of this approach, see Ilona van Tuinen, “Jan van Goyen,” in Ger Luijten, Peter Schatborn, and Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., *Drawings for Paintings in the Age of Rembrandt* (Milan, 2016), 127–129.
- [6] Beck only lists three other winter scenes in vertical format. See Hans-Ulrich Beck, *Jan van Goyen, 1596–1656: ein Oeuvreverzeichnis*, vol. 2, *Katalog der Gemälde* (Amsterdam, 1973), 15–16, cat. nos. 27, 28, and 29a.
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The wooden support consists of one panel with horizontal grain that was cradled during a past treatment. The support is 0.6 cm thick (1/4 in.), and the top edge of the reverse is slightly beveled. There is no evidence that the panel's size was altered during any past treatment.

The topmost visible ground layer is off-white in color. Examination using a binocular microscope indicates there is a white layer applied throughout the sky, on top of the ground, but this layer does not extend into the foreground. The paint medium is estimated to be oil, and the layers were applied thinly with little to no impasto. The figures and objects were likely painted in stages on top of an off-white/gray layer, and it appears that the shape and contours of these elements were adjusted as Van Goyen also reworked areas of the foreground. These numerous small revisions are visible in the infrared reflectogram (IRR), but they are also easily visible in normal light; the artist only applied thin off-white/gray strokes on top of the darker paints of the figures and objects in the foreground. [1] Although the paint was applied in stages, wet over dry, many elements were worked up wet into wet during those stages, including the observation tower and the trees on the right side of the composition.

The panel is currently structurally sound, though old woodworm tunnels are visible in the x-radiograph. [2] The ground and paint layers are in very good condition. There are a few pinpoint losses in the foreground and there are several small losses along the edges. There are only minor amounts of retouching on the damages along the edges, as well as a few small, scattered areas throughout. The varnish is even and saturating.

Dina Anchin

May 7, 2019

TECHNICAL NOTES

- [1] Infrared reflectography was carried out using a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera filtered to 1.1–1.4 microns (J filter).
- [2] X-radiography was carried out with a Comet Technologies XRP-75MXR-75HP tube, and the images were digitally captured using a Carestream Industrex Blue Digital Imaging Plate 5537 (14 × 17 in.). The parameters were 30 kV, 5 mA, 30 seconds, and 40 in. distance (from source to plate). The resulting digital images were composited and processed using Adobe Photoshop CS5.
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PROVENANCE

Jacques-Phillippe Le Bas [1707-1783], Paris; (his estate sale, at his residence, Paris, 1-6 December 1783, no. 1);[1] Dulac. (Eugene Slatter Gallery, London), in 1949.[2] (Thomas Agnew & Sons, Ltd., London);[3] purchased 1976 by private collection, United States; (sale, Sotheby's, London, 30 January 2014, no. 37); (Richard Green [Fine Paintings], London); sold 30 May 2014 to NGA.

[1] The painting sold for 340.3 livres; its description in the sale catalogue reads: "...ce Tableau d'une bonne couleur, est un des plus beaux de ce Maitre."

[2] The painting was included in the 1949 summer exhibition at the Slatter Gallery.

[3] On the reverse of the painting is an Agnew's label with number 39446 on it.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1949 Exhibition of Dutch and Flemish Masters, Eugene Slatter Gallery, London, 1949, no. 4, repro., as *Skating Scene*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1972 Beck, Hans-Ulrich. *Jan van Goyen 1596-1656, ein Oeuvreverzeichnis*. 4 vols. Vol. 2: Katalog der Gemälde. Amsterdam, 1973: 16, no. 30, repro.
- 2014 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. "Gifts and Acquisitions: Jan van Goyen, Ice Scene Near a Wooden Observation Tower." *National Gallery of Art Bulletin* no. 51 (Fall 2014): 21-22, repro.
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